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Drifting Apart? European Journalists and their Audiences

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Abstract

How do the current technological changes and socio-political developments impact on the relationship between European journalists and their audiences? This article draws on selected findings from a larger research project conducted in eleven European countries. Focusing on European journalists' understanding of their audiences, the paper suggests that in many European countries digital technologies and increased competition play a significant role in the changing relationship between journalists and their audiences. The literature reviews undertaken in the eleven European countries indicate that the relationship between journalists/media professionals and their audiences has undergone significant changes. While the interviewed journalists are alert to a shift towards journalistic practices and formats which permit certain forms of audience participation, many of them sense an increasing disconnection from the public and severe mistrust by citizens; which crucially impacts on their relationship with audiences.

Introduction

In the last two decades technological changes as well as socio-political developments have impacted on European media and journalists in a variety of ways. The effects of the Internet on established media systems, journalistic practices and the consumption of media contents have been widely documented and further changes are expected with the digital switchover in European countries. Developments brought about by technological changes can be identified at a number of levels, from the overarching level of media systems and their transformation (e.g. changing positions in the market, increased competition between various media, emergence of new types of media) to the level of the everyday conduct of journalists' work (e.g. the increase in multi-skilling).

During the same period of time a number of socio-political changes have also impacted on media and media professionals in Europe. At the level of media systems the evident example is the fall of communism and the subsequent emergence of new media systems (with public service and commercial media) in

Eastern European countries. Increasing levels of migration from within Europe, as well as from beyond, have also had consequences for media and the journalistic profession (e.g. migrants are targeted as audiences, migrant media are founded, contents that deal with immigration related issues are produced etc.). Another feature shared across the European media space has been the questioning of the legitimacy and role of public service broadcasting and the rise of new forms of journalism (citizen journalism has been studied in particular).

This article reports on an attempt to map the changes occurring in the profession of journalism in Europe since 1992 and it is based on the findings of 89 interviews conducted with journalists in eleven countries – the Czech Republic, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain. Within the framework of an EU-funded research project¹, relevant media and communications literature published in these countries was also reviewed. The current article² discusses one aspect of the findings from this research project, by focusing on changes in the relationship between European journalists and their audiences. The article largely relies upon reports from individual national research teams; thus drawing together the threads from the different countries. I will open up with an overview of the developments identified as key to the changing relationship between journalists and audiences (or indeed, audiences and journalists); then move on to a discussion of the findings from the interviews with 89 media professionals in order to shed light on the journalists' points of view.

New Technology: Bridging the Producer/Consumer Gap?

The impact of new technologies on journalism has been widely explored. John Pavlik (2000), for example, identifies four broad areas in which new technologies influence journalism: journalists' work, news content, structure and/or organisation of the newsroom, as well as the relationship between media, journalists and their audiences/publics. In reference to the latter, Pavlik argues that journalistic work resembles a dialogue between the press and the public, especially so in the case of news organisations committed to online publishing, in these cases in particular, audience members have joined in significant numbers in online discussions with reporters and editors to debate and discuss coverage of important events. E-mail has become a vital and instantaneous link between readers and reporters, often shaping reporters' knowledge and attitudes as much as an initial report may have influenced the public (Ibid, 235).

It has also been argued extensively that online media content provides audiences with more options for creating personalised information environments (cf. Geens et al. 2007) and that this increased personalisation of information – concerns have been raised particularly about news – might enable audiences to be cut off from larger currents of public information in society, thus effectively further

fragmenting news audiences. Journalists, thus, address and compete for increasingly more fragmented audiences whose media use tends to be selective and individualised. One implication of this situation is that in order to target media products more successfully journalists (and media organisations respectively) need to gain better knowledge of their audiences.

There is no doubt that the last decade witnessed an increase in the possibilities for audiences/publics not only to interact with content providers but to create their own contents. However, the question remains as to what extent these 'new' forms of interactivity differ from previous ones (such as letters to the editor, for example); particularly in the degree to which they are controlled and the extent to which they contribute to blurring the distinction between media content producers and media content consumers (cf. Thurman 2008, who demonstrates that formats of reader participation tend to be overwhelmingly edited or pre-mediated). Likewise, existing research does not provide clear confirmation of the thesis about the audiences' increased interactive use of journalism as a result of new technologies. Researchers have so far concentrated in particular on news consumption on Internet sites (cf. e.g. Hujanen and Pietikainen 2004) with research results indicating that the audiences' use of interactivity here is limited. In addition, we need to bear in mind that at least in terms of news consumption audiences continue to rely on television as their main source of news. According to a report by the UK Office for Communications in 2002 65% of the UK adult population identified television as their most important source of news. This share remained the same in 2006, though in comparison the share of those who identified the Internet as their main source of news grew from 2% in 2002 to 6% in 2006 (2007, 17). The prevalence of television news viewing – characterised by little interactive potential – indicates that the relationship between journalists and audiences is not necessarily characterised by increased interactivity. As suggested above the thesis about journalists' growing responsiveness to audience demands as a consequence of the use of new technologies can thus not be considered valid as a rule.

In the light of the above outlined theoretical arguments we expected that the journalists we interviewed in the various European countries would comment on the impact of technological changes on their relationship with audiences and would also touch upon the changing balance in this relationship. However, before moving on to the discussion of the journalists' views on this subject I want to consider another factor that is likely to play a major role in journalists' understandings of their relationship with audiences – the increasingly competitive media market.

Commercial Pressures: The Art of Wooing Audiences

Increased competition for audiences, combined with tendencies towards deregulatory policies (on media deregulation cf. e.g. McChesney 2003; Murdock 1992) have lead some researchers to voice concerns about the quality of journalistic content. The phenomena labelled ‘dumbing down’, tabloidization and infotainment have been widely studied, and occur as a result of a combination of various economic and socio-political developments (cf. Winston 2002; Djupsund and Carlson 1998; Sparks 2000). In the case of Italy, for instance, tabloidization began in the mid-1980s and intensified in the 1990s as a result of increased volumes of advertising investment, an opening up of the market, a boom in local news and local media, the increased visibility of new social groups (in particular women and young people) in media audiences, an extended geographical coverage of news and the emergence of varied types of news as well as growth in the importance and autonomy of news media in society (Buonanno cited in ter Wal 2006). Although this article does not deal particularly with tabloidization trends, the topic is relevant at least in two respects: firstly, academics as well as journalists (the latter in particular) argue that changes in journalistic practices also relate to audience ‘demands’, hence pointing out that journalists are working in a highly competitive field and need to provide audiences with ‘what they want’ (cf. also Deuze 2005). Secondly, tabloidization plays a role in ‘provoking responses from viewers and stimulating talk and discussions among them’ (Dahlgren 1997, 94); thus potentially fostering audience participation.

In some cases, media organisations are particularly dependent on audience demographics. Meryl Aldridge (2003) demonstrates that local and regional media in the United Kingdom are in a particularly difficult position when attracting audiences, above all young audience members whom advertisers find most attractive. Arguably, in these cases journalists are under great pressure to adjust the conduct of their profession to audiences’ (perceived) demands and expectations, and to building a particularly strong relationship with them.

In the preceding sections I have briefly outlined some changes affecting the journalistic profession which are linked to new technologies and increased commercial pressures. These developments are likely to have an impact on the relationship between journalists and audiences and they might indeed be decisive for a shift in power within this relationship. The media and communications literature is inconclusive in terms of a shift of power from journalists to audiences as a result of increased interactivity enabled by new technologies. Competitive pressures raise a number of complex questions concerning the relationship between journalists and audiences. Similarly as with the impact of technological changes, the pressure to attract larger audiences might bring about changes in the balance in the relationship between journalists and their readers/viewers/listeners. It can be argued that increased pressures to attract audiences make journalists

more sensitive to their (perceived) needs, demands and interests. At the same time, however, journalists may feel increasingly under pressure not to alienate them, for example by publishing on controversial issues. Some journalists may even feel that the profit oriented nature of their work jeopardises professional values. These are only some of the possible issues that journalists may comment upon in relation to the impact of increased commercial pressures on their relationship with readers/viewers/listeners. I should, however, note that despite the clear significance of these issues they have been under-researched at least within the European context. The literature reviews conducted in the eleven European countries offered very little insight into this aspect of the journalists' professional conduct and identity. This article attempts to rectify at least to some extent this lack of literature, and in the following sections it moves on to the discussion of empirical research that centred on journalists' perceptions of the changing nature of their relationship with audiences.

Methodology

One of the areas that the EMEDIATE research project explored was the changing conduct and nature of the journalism in Europe. The relationship between journalists and their audiences represents one aspect of these changes and it was explored through literature reviews conducted in a number of European countries as well as in-depth interviews with senior media professionals in 11 European countries. Apart from Serbia, all were member states of the European Union. The selection of these countries was guided by the aim to cover the varied practice and development of journalism in Europe. Some of the differences in the development of European media systems and journalism are obvious, e.g. it is hardly questionable that countries with a totalitarian past and those with a democratic one have experienced radically different phases of media development (e.g. post-communist countries started developing public service broadcasting less than two decades ago). On the other hand, the development of education programmes and of professional organisations for journalists in various European countries represents perhaps a less evident albeit equally important factor (cf. Preston and Horgan 2006). Altogether 89 interviews were conducted. The semi-structured in-depth interviews used the same set of questions in all of the countries under investigation. This included the question 'Has the relationship between journalists and readers/viewers changed in the past 10-15 years and, if so, in what way(s)?' This is particularly relevant for this article. However, I also consider responses to some of the other questions where they are relevant for the following discussion³.

The interviews were conducted by project partners based in various European universities⁴ who were selected according to their expertise on the region, geographical and linguistic factors as well as personal access to interviewees. For

example, the team at Dublin City University conducted the interviews in Great Britain and Ireland, but also in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as one of the researchers on the team was a Czech media sociologist. All interviews (apart from the ones conducted in the Czech Republic and Slovakia) were held in late 2005 and early 2006. The Czech and Slovak interviews were commissioned at the end of 2006 in order to enlarge the pool of empirical data. The majority of interviews were conducted in person, in exceptional cases over the telephone. The interviews were planned to last for about 45 minutes; however, in some cases they lasted for up to two hours.

The selection of interviewees followed a number of criteria set up to ensure comparability of findings. The media targeted in the search for interviewees were to reflect the differing journalistic cultures and methodologies of print and broadcast media; the balance between national and regional media as well as the balance between privately and publicly owned media. Also, in a number of countries included in the research the mass media demonstrate class-specific characteristics with target audiences belonging to specific social classes, a fact that was to be reflected in the selection process. However, to map the class-specific nature of mass media proved to be a difficulty for the teams interviewing in former communist countries. They could not use this criterion in the selection of interviewees as it is not applicable to the media stratification in these countries. Table 1 presents basic data on interviews, providing information on their number and type of medium.

Table 1: Interviews by country and type of medium

| Country | Total Interviews | Press | Broadcast | Other |
|----------------|------------------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Britain | 7 | 4 | 3 | ~ |
| Czech Republic | 8 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| France | 9 | 4 | 5 | ~ |
| Hungary | 7 | 3 | 3 | 1 |
| Ireland | 8 | 6 | 2 | ~ |
| Italy | 7 | 5 | 2 | ~ |
| Netherlands | 6 | 3 | 3 | ~ |
| Serbia | 11 | 6 | 3 | 2 |
| Slovakia | 6 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| Slovenia | 10 | 4 | 6 | ~ |
| Spain | 10 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| TOTALS | 89 | 48 | 35 | 6 |

Similarly to the process of media selection potential interviewees were also identified on the basis of identical criteria. We targeted media professionals whose careers spanned all or a great deal of the period since 1989, operated at senior levels in a gate-keeper or editorial role, and in addition had well-established professional reputations and (ideally) experience in both print and broadcast media. In some cases, finding interviewees who fulfilled all these criteria proved difficult: the French team, for example, found it

challenging to gain access to journalistic ‘stars’. In exceptional cases, interviewees working in other than print and broadcast media were approached either because of the influence of the organisation for which they worked on the news making process (e.g. news agencies, consultancies), their expert knowledge (for instance, a media studies scholar) or their previous work experience (for example, former editors). An overview of the print and broadcast media (and other organisations) that the interviewees were affiliated with, as well as their work positions at the time of interviewing is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Interviewees’ affiliation and position by country.

| Country (Total interviews) | Media Outlets | Interviewees’ Positions |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Britain (7) | <i>Press:</i> Sunday Times; Sun; Scotsman; Unidentified mid-market <i>Broadcast:</i> BBC News 24; ITV News; Sky News | Editorial staff |
| Czech Republic (8) | <i>Press:</i> MF Dnes; Brněnský deník; Lidové noviny; Mladá fronta (no longer exists) <i>Broadcast:</i> Český rozhlas 1 – Radiožurnál; Česká televize <i>Other:</i> Unidentified media consultancy | A retired editor, a consultancy owner and editorial staff |
| France (9) | <i>Press:</i> Ouest France; Le Monde Diplomatique; Le Monde <i>Broadcast:</i> France Inter; Radio Monte Carlo; TF1; France 3; France 2 | A retired editor, 3 correspondents and editorial staff |
| Hungary (7) | <i>Press:</i> Népszabadság; Dunántúli Napló; Blikk <i>Broadcast:</i> TV2; Magyar Televízió; Magyar Rádió <i>Other:</i> Magyar Távirati Iroda (national news agency) | Chairman, editorial staff |
| Ireland (8) | <i>Press:</i> Irish Star; Sunday Independent; Irish Examiner; Irish Independent; Unidentified daily <i>Broadcast:</i> Radio Telefís Éireann; News Talk 106 | A former editor, a correspondent and editorial staff |
| Italy (7) | <i>Press:</i> La Repubblica; Quotidiano Nazionale; Il Giornale di Reggio; Il Messaggero; Il Manifesto <i>Broadcast:</i> RAI 1; TG3 | A former editor and editorial staff |
| Netherlands (6) | <i>Press:</i> Trouw; De Volkskrant; NRC Handelsblad <i>Broadcast:</i> RTL Nieuws; NOS Journaal | A former editor, a reporter and editorial staff |
| Serbia (11) | <i>Press:</i> Nin; Blic; Vreme; Politika; Danas <i>Broadcast:</i> B92; Radio televizija Srbije; B202 <i>Other:</i> Beta (independent news agency) | A director and editorial staff |
| Slovakia (6) | <i>Press:</i> SME; .týždeň; Plus jeden deň; Pravda <i>Broadcast:</i> Rádio Slovensko | A freelancer, a columnist and editorial staff |
| Slovenia (10) | <i>Press:</i> Delo; Primorske novice; Večer <i>Broadcast:</i> TV Slovenija; Radio Slovenija; Radio Robin; TV Primorska; Radio Murski Val | 2 former editors (currently directors), editorial staff |
| Spain (10) | <i>Press:</i> El País; El Correo Español- El Pueblo Vasco; La Vanguardia; El Norte de Castilla <i>Broadcast:</i> Radio Galega; Radio Madrid; Cuatro; Radio Televisión Valenciana; Canal Sur <i>Other:</i> University of Malaga | A media analyst, editorial staff |

Note: In some cases, two interviewees were employed at the same medium, this applies to the Czech MF Dnes, the French Le Monde, the Dutch NOS Journaal, the Serbian Danas and Beta as well as the Slovenian Delo and TV Slovenija.

Ethical issues were also considered and interviewees were offered the option of remaining anonymous, in some cases not only the identity of the interviewee but also of the medium for which s/he worked were not disclosed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and subsequently analysed by the individual teams who wrote a report in English⁵. The present discussion of findings is grounded in the unpublished project reports (one of the exceptions in this respect is the comparative report by Preston and Horgan 2006).

The empirical part of the investigation was concerned with soliciting journalists' views on whether they understood their relationship with audiences as a changing one and if so, which aspects of the relationship were changing and how.

Interview Findings

Overall Attitudes to a Changing Relationship

The obvious starting point for our interviews was to identify whether the journalists actually perceived changes in their relationship with audiences. Indeed, all of the interviewed journalists acknowledged that there were changes in their relationship with readers/viewers/listeners and they tended to associate these changes with technological developments, increased competition and significant socio-political changes. Journalists' views on the degree and significance of changes were very varied; it has to be pointed out, however, that there was general agreement in two cases. Both represent instances when journalists did not fulfil their professional roles well. One was Dutch journalists' failure to correctly estimate public opinion at important political junction points (the rise of the anti-immigration Pim Fortuyn List party in 2002 and the referendum on the European Constitution in 2005) and the other related to distrust that Eastern European journalists perceived on the part of their audiences. Journalists understood both cases as marking a severe alienation from their audiences.

The media professionals interviewed in the eleven European countries were outspoken in their views on the impact of new technologies on the journalistic profession, as well as their relationship with audiences. Indeed, the increased interactive nature of this relationship was stressed by the majority of journalists regardless of the country in which they practised journalism. The interviewees particularly pointed out that email and text messaging had opened up the lines of communication between media producers and consumers, and that the use of new technologies allowed editors to know which stories were generating most interest among viewers/readers (this is enabled by simple devices monitoring traffic on the website). Such enhanced knowledge about their audiences was often understood as crucial to the commercial success of a medium (an issue discussed in more depth later on) but also to fulfilling the obligations that public service broadcasters have.

Conforming to 'What the Audience Wants'

Throughout the eleven countries a number of journalists in our sample drew close links between knowing what the audiences want on the one hand, and changing news values on the other. They perceived a shift away from foreign news coverage and towards more 'light' news topics such as lifestyle or health. This was often interpreted as a consequence of conforming to audience demands and everyday interests of readers, viewers and listeners. An Italian print journalist working for *La Repubblica* explained this shift in news selection and values in the following way:

We now worry more about talking to a reader with less cultural capital as we aim to extend the market but also knowledge. There is the invasion in newspapers of so-called 'infographics' which also aims to explain better to the reader what we are talking about. This is the technical problem of the linguistic and informative approach, the other problem is that of the choice of topics where we try to choose topics that can interest people, not only the development of the crisis in the Middle East but that it gives you, for example, a guide to how to confront headaches rather than children's education and here, although it is an interesting research, maybe sometimes we exaggerate because perhaps the news becomes too light and superficial. (ter Wal and Valeriani 2006 [Report by the Dutch team])

Perhaps unsurprisingly, journalists from all eleven countries pointed out that market pressures and increased competition had a major impact on their work and their relationship with audiences, in addition to new technological possibilities. I have already mentioned that European journalists pointed out a better knowledge of their audiences' expectations and interests as a key element in the changing relationship. However, they also frequently pointed out that the quest for such knowledge had been driven by commercial pressures. Due to the increasingly competitive environment (for instance, print media competing with television, broadcast media competing with the Internet) journalists said they had made a greater effort to gauge the interests and opinions of media consumers and to tailor news content to appeal to them, as well as making it more accessible⁶. This was mentioned by interviewees regardless of their country of residence or the type of medium they worked in. For example, a Dutch interviewee working for *De Volkskrant* summed up the situation in this way:

Low culture can now also be published front page once in a while. In the past you only had the acronyms of the trade unions in the headlines on the front page. We think most readers are interested in that [light news] even if they would not admit it to themselves. Research shows this. The culture of 'we [journalists] determine what is interesting', whole page articles about boring subjects ... is gone. Today we think more about: Do people actually find it interesting? Can they understand it? Is it presented accessibly enough? The newsrooms now think about all this. This is in my view an improvement and they have to. (ter Wal and Valeriani 2006 [Report by the Dutch team])

In terms of the need to attract large audiences, our interviewed media professionals perceived a general pressure to appeal to the entire population; however, some social groups were seen to have been sought after more than others due to their increased attractiveness to advertisers. For example, a British journalist with the *Sunday Times*, noting that his newspaper was attempting to target younger readers, observed:

In order to do that, we are running stories that we might have rejected a number of weeks ago. ...Similarly, if I can have a story that will appeal particularly to women we'll go for that. (Preston 2006 [Report by the Irish team])

Likewise, an Irish interviewee working for the *Irish Star* spoke of the significance of the Joint National Media Research figures and their impact on the content of newspapers by encouraging the desired socio-economic and age makeup of the readership:

There is a sense that in general, and in Ireland in particular, society has become more middle class. This has tended to produce forms of journalism that are more consumer-driven – by that and by lifestyle issues. (Horgan 2006 [Report by the Irish team])

An interviewee working for the French commercial *Radio Monte Carlo* expressed a similar view:

A broadcaster, a radio, a TV, a paper, today in France, are also private companies which need to live, to survive, and market data naturally affect the way to work ... in choosing the subjects, we have some kind of marketing approach. (Guyot et al. 2006)

Such pressure was also perceived in public service media. A Czech journalist working for public service radio explained that the listener is ‘the boss’:

Not to a tabloid extent but we are here for him and he is paying us. ... I respect them [listeners] enormously; we attempt to provide public service. ... But there are limits which we will not cross – people who have a simplifying view that when they pay for the radio then they own it and they would like to shape the programme as well ... not that. (Waschkova Cisarova 2007a [Report by the Irish team])

Clearly, a number of the journalists viewed compliance with audience demands and needs as a threat to the quality of their work, and in this respect they held a negative view of their audiences. An interesting observation was made by an Italian journalist employed at *Quotidiano Nazionale* who suggested that the press in general considered the audience’s intelligence and critical abilities too low. She claimed that

conceding to present information which is easily understandable rather than complex and in-depth is based on the misleading presumption that the public is ignorant. Her concern, however, was not shared by other interviewees who commented on the 'decreased' quality of news reporting, while offering the rather negative perception of having to conform to the public's 'low taste', to use the expression of a Serbian journalist (Zagar and Zeljan 2006a [Report by the Slovenian team]). The scope of this article does not allow me to deal in detail with journalists' views on the quality of reporting. I can note that all of the interviewed journalists argued that their professional values had not changed in the past 15 years which would imply that they saw the quality of their outputs as stable. Yet on the other hand some journalists related decreased quality to the pressure to conform to audiences' demands, to the increased reliance on new technologies (they found the high speed of news production particularly problematic in terms of increasing the possibility of errors) and in some cases interventions in content, a consequence of pressure from politicians or advertisers.

A Changed Power Relationship?

Despite such wide-spread concerns about increasing pressures to conform to audience demands, only a few of our interviewees commented on the supposedly increased power of audiences to effectively influence media content. In other words while at a very general level journalists identified the need (almost an obligation) to acquire a better knowledge of what media contents their audiences seek and acknowledged the role of new technologies in facilitating this knowledge, most media professionals pointed out that the decisions regarding which content to focus on were still entirely in the journalists' hands. One of the French journalists employed at *Le Monde* expressed the opinion that:

the reader is not the one who tells us what to write. The reader can tell us which issues are interesting, but about what we put in the paper, for example the death penalty, we don't give a damn whether the reader is for or against. We are against. (Guyot et al. 2006 [Report by the French team])

This view should perhaps not come as a surprise as it is in line with the actual professional status of our interviewees. Most of the journalists we interviewed worked in the position of editors – also known as gatekeepers – who decide which information is newsworthy.

If the journalists expressed their opinion on interference with media content at all, they would give examples of political or economic interventions. It was very rarely that journalists would claim direct involvement in cases when a politician or an important advertiser attempted to prevent the publication of certain contents. On the other hand, and this was particularly the case with interviewees from former communist countries, they had knowledge of such cases. These journalists either

referred to a shift from political control under communism to economic control after regime change, or offered personal knowledge of cases of political interference in the media after the fall of communism. I should, however, stress that the large majority of interviewees drew a clear distinction between the influence of owners on media content (which none of them acknowledged) and the influence of market pressures (in particular financial constraints that led to limitations on news supplies as well as the decrease in foreign news). A related issue that was brought up by a small number of journalists from across all the eleven countries was self-censorship. Journalists who talked about it pointed out that even if there was no pressure in an actual form to encourage or prevent the publication of certain contents, individual journalists may opt to reject some contents as they would perceive them as potentially damaging for the medium (e.g. it would result in a drop in readership or withdrawal of an advertiser).

It follows from the above discussion that – judging by the journalists’ views – influences on media contents represent a rather complex issue. The journalists acknowledge a number of indirect influences on content (exercised by audiences, advertisers and politicians and also a consequence of market competition) but very little direct interference with contents. It appears that in terms of journalists’ everyday professional conduct the main choices and decisions remain with our interviewees’ editors.

A Sense of ‘Disconnection’

Perhaps the most striking finding in relation to the question about changes that our interviewees could identify in their relationships with readers/viewers/listeners relates to the journalists’ understanding of the way their profession is perceived by the general public. In virtually every country at least some interviewees pointed out that trust and respect for journalism had been on the decline. Typical comments in this respect were along these lines: “Today, there is a reaction of rejection towards information and journalists that was not so strong before [...] But now, it is general, there is a total rejection.” (Guyot et al. 2006 [Report by the French team]) Interviewees perceived factual mistakes in reporting, but also miscomprehension of the public’s view at key moments as reasons for this distrust. For instance, a French interviewee working for *Le Monde Diplomatique* pointed out:

[media professionals] cannot be totally disconnected from what the majority of people think ... They got it wrong with the referendum as all the media, almost the majority of them, in quite a scandalous way, were favourable to the ‘yes’ and disparaged the ‘no’. 56% of the people said ‘no’. This is a slap in the face for the media. They haven’t drawn any consequences from it. (Guyot et al. 2006 [Report by the French team])

The sense of ‘disconnection’ from the public was most notable in the case of Dutch journalists. All Dutch interviewees mentioned the rise of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn in spring 2002⁷ as a key event that has changed Dutch editorial culture and relationships with audiences. In the words of an interviewee employed at the Dutch *De Volkskrant*:

The reader is now as displaced and emancipated as the voter. The voter no longer lets his party or pillar tell him what he should think. You could say the reader has also become more emancipated. He can get his information from anywhere. He no longer lets you tell him what to think. It [reporting] has become much more cautious also in the editorial comments of the editor-in- chief today that goes in all directions that is no longer only left-wing. So we also feel this emancipation, and that we can no longer force an opinion onto the reader. (ter Wal 2006 [Report by the Dutch team])

The situation resulted in various attempts by Dutch journalists to reconnect with society, as another Dutch interviewee working for *NOS Journaal* explained:

I at least was shocked, and we have organised things differently with regional correspondents; going into the neighbourhoods more, going outside the Randstad area, keeping track of developments in all strata of society. And that affects your coverage because you make more varied topics, because you pay more often attention to maybe also injustice, poverty issues because we have started dealing differently with the migration issue. After all, we started looking in a harsher way at asylum issues, not only being politically correct but also let the opponents have their say; that has changed the coverage because our attitude towards the public has changed. (ter Wal 2006 [Report by the Dutch team])

Interestingly, journalists from former communist countries pointed out that media professionals valued their audiences more, but at the same time readers and viewers trusted the journalists less – even less so than they did under communist rule. A certain sense of disconnection from the public was also expressed by these journalists who interpreted this issue as a result of major socio-political changes. The former communist countries in the sample have undergone major changes since the fall of communism in the late 1980s/early 1990s which, naturally, affected the media system as well. In less than two decades, public service broadcasting as well as commercial media were established (cf. e.g. Sparks 1998; O’Neil 1997). In some cases post-communist governments interfered significantly in the independence of the media. In the case of the Slovak Republic, a nationalist government led by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar gained control of public service broadcasting. This government interfered in the allocation of licenses for commercial broadcasting (cf. Metykova 2004). At a more general level, Mečiar’s style of governing and his practices split not only media professionals into pro-government and opposition ones (e.g. only selected journalists could attend

government press conferences) but also polarised the public at large. Eventually the government fell in 1998; yet some of the journalists we interviewed in 2007 still perceived the impact of this polarisation on their relations with the public. A Slovak journalist working for the national daily *Pravda* commented on the decreasing quality in the relationship between readers and journalists in the following way:

It is probably connected to the political polarisation in Slovakia, it was really during the 1990s under the Mečiar government that the polarisation was really huge and...journalists were positioned on the one side or on the other very clearly... the polarisation was such also in the relationship between journalists and readers and other journalists because they were actually political figures which was abnormal. I think that the relationship is now more neutral than it was in the 1990s. (Waschkova Cisarova 2007b [Report by Irish team])

Slovak and Czech journalists in particular argued that the degree of trust in their relationship with audiences was, paradoxically, worse than it used to be in communist times. A Slovak interviewee employed at the weekly *tyždeň* explained:

Today there is more scepticism about what appears in the papers, on television ... the relationship between media and readers has paradoxically worsened, media enjoy less trust than under communism which is weird ... today they are not taken seriously ... they are understood more as entertainment. (Waschkova Cisarova 2007b [Report by Irish team])

Sharing this opinion, a Czech journalist working for the daily *MF Dnes* commented:

The readers used to play the game with us, they understood although we were only writing between the lines ... today that reader is not so committed, he has a much greater chance to choose and question. (Ibid)

Similar to this, Czech and other journalists from the various European countries also pointed out that their audiences had been becoming more demanding and selective, 'because people have more diversity and have more to choose from' – to use the words of a Spanish interviewee working for the daily *La Vanguardia* (Guyot et al. 2006 [Report by the French team]). Moreover, journalists also perceived criticism of their work on the increase; both inside the profession as well as from the general public. As pointed out by a former employee at the French *Le Monde*:

Journalism has lost its sacred aura. Now, the public asks the journalist for an explanation for the way he fulfils his job. And people are right to show this demand. Criticising media takes part in a healthy democracy. Being a

journalist means asking for accounts as well as being accountable. (Guyot et al. 2006 [Report by the French team])

Journalists appear to understand the changes outlined in this section as most dramatic in the last 15 years. This is understandable as, in contrast with, for example, the impact of technological changes the ‘failures’ described above are perceived as seriously questioning the role of the media in democratic societies, journalists’ professional conduct and equally importantly their professional legitimacy. Trust that journalists build up in their relationship with audiences, as well as with sources appears to be a central value to the profession and in the increasingly competitive environment with abundant media contents and fragmented and highly individualised consumption patterns, trust and trustworthiness seem to be crucial for success.

Conclusion and Prospects for Future Research

Most of the findings from the research are in line with general trends documented in media and communications literature – not only in relation to European countries. One of the aims of the research was to explore whether the relationship between journalists and audiences was indeed changing. The literature review suggested that this was the case, and the view was also confirmed by the journalists interviewed for the project. In terms of what aspects of the relationship were changing and how, two obvious areas were identified on the basis of literature reviews: technology-driven changes and competition-driven ones. Most journalists we interviewed understood technology-driven changes as enabling a more interactive and direct relationship with audiences. However, this tended to be seen as empowering journalists to do their jobs better rather than blurring the distinction between content producers and content consumers. What the journalists understood as improved through the introduction of new technologies largely involved better knowledge of their audiences’ expectations and interests – hence an improved ability to attract larger numbers of readers, viewers and listeners. Some journalists argued that it was beneficial to be able to reach less cultured or less educated audiences; however, for a few journalists in our sample the pressure of attracting larger audiences resulted in the view that they needed to conform to low(er) standards and tastes. There are many possible explanations for the journalists’ overwhelming view that despite the new technologies’ empowering potential for audiences, power remains with media professionals. The controlled nature of the technology mediated interaction was seen to leave power in the hands of media professionals, while technologies were primarily perceived as ‘tools’ enabling media organisations to win larger audience shares in a tough competitive environment. It is equally important that new technologies and their impact on the relationship between journalists and audiences were not perceived as a challenge to the journalists’ legitimate role of interpreters – in line with Zygmunt Bauman’s (1987) understanding of the changing nature of intellectual work in the

post-modern period, who argues that journalists play the role of interpreters, translating between knowledge systems based on different traditions.

The most significant shift that the interviewed journalists identified involved what they termed 'loss of trust' or 'disconnection' from the public. It is in this respect that their role of interpreters was challenged in a very significant way. The vast majority of interviewees (regardless of their nationality) identified changing public attitudes towards journalists and journalism, which in some cases took the extreme form of a perceived loss of trust. However, even in less 'extreme' cases, journalists referred to increased demands on their journalistic work, as well as more public criticism and scrutiny. This phenomenon of loss of trust or 'disconnection' from the public can be related to important socio-political developments in which the various roles of media and journalists were 'tested'. Journalists from former communist countries referred to past polarisations of the audience as well as the journalistic profession on a political basis, and suggested that the consequences continued to be felt. French and Dutch journalists referred to cases in which the drift away from the public was understood as the result of a journalistic failure to detect (and represent) the prevalent public opinion.

While I have primarily concentrated on the common threads running through all or at least the majority of interviews from all countries in this article, there are, of course, more subtle differences. The various national journalistic legacies, media landscapes, legislations and traditions of journalistic education in particular can be seen as influencing journalists' relationships with their audiences (on some of these cf. Preston and Horgan 2006; Wahl-Jorgensen and Franklin 2007; Löffelholz and Weaver 2008). Yet, as the scope of this article does not make it possible to explore these in detail, an investigation into cross-national differences and the context they relate to make a good starting point for further research on the subject.

Notes

¹ EMEDIATE: Media and Ethics of a European Public Sphere from the Treaty of Rome to the 'War on Terror', project no.CIT2-CT-2004-506027.

² This article is a significantly re-worked version of a paper presented at the IAMCR conference held in Paris, France on 22 - 25 July 2007.

³ E.g. responses to the questions on the influence of technological changes on journalistic practices and on the practices and processes that operate in the coverage of controversial issues.

⁴ The teams involved in the interviewing were based at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary; Dublin City University, Ireland; Educational Research Institute in Ljubljana and University of Primorska, Slovenia; Université de Paris 8 Vincennes Saint Denis Paris, France and Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

⁵ The individual teams analysed the interviews they conducted on the basis of shared methodological criteria and prepared a report. This article works primarily with data from the individual unpublished national reports.

⁶ It should be noted in this respect that the journalists' perception of having to conform to audience demands was (in some cases) contrasted with a rather strong refusal to do so. This finding can indicate that for at least some journalists the 'exclusive right' to make decisions about contents formed a core part of their professional identity/integrity and was not to be jeopardised due to commercial pressures.

⁷ The rise of Pim Fortuyn and his party came as a surprise to many Dutch media professionals. In February 2002 Pim Fortuyn founded his anti-immigration party, the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) and created a powerful new presence on the Dutch national political centre stage. On 6 May 2002 he was shot dead by a lone gunman. A week later LPF came second in the Dutch general election, taking 26 seats.

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